

VZCZCXRO3901
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0064/01 0291314
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 291314Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4577
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7205
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5445
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0755
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 4837
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 7930
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000064

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR JORDAN, LONDON FOR TSOU
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, PRM/ANE
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2018

TAGS: [IZ](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL WAXMAN MEETS WITH SYRIAN DEPUTY FOREIGN
MINISTER - DISCUSS IRAQI REFUGEES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: Charge D'Affairs Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (U) This cable replaces Syria 00029.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: In a January 9 meeting with Senate staffers Sharon Waxman and Perry Cammack, D/FM Miqdad outlined the significant challenges to Syria posed by Iraqi refugees and conveyed the SARG's unhappiness with recent U.S. statements criticizing Syria. When asked by Waxman to provide a yes or no answer, Miqdad said the decision regarding the issuance of visas for DHS circuit riders was now in the hands of "decision makers." Waxman and Cammack pressed human rights issues including that of the travel ban on former MP and opposition leader and the presently detained members of the Damascus Declaration National Council. End Summary.

Syria Facing "Serious Challenges"

[1](#)3. (C) D/FM Miqdad explained Syria was facing "serious challenges" on economic and humanitarian fronts. He added that the last two years had been particularly difficult for Syria as many of the Iraqi refugees had come with little money, perhaps enough to meet their rent for four months, while the wealthy Iraqis had gone to Jordan. Miqdad detailed the burdens facing Syria, noting that their Iraqi "brothers and sister" enjoy the same privileges as the citizens of Syria. The influx of so many refugees had put a strain on resource, particularly given that the SARG subsidizes oil, health, public services etc., according to Miqdad. In the health field alone, Miqdad claimed, Syria was spending an additional 1.5 billion dollars a year to address the health needs of the Iraqi refugees. On education, Miqdad noted school classrooms, which once contained 25 students, now cater to 60 students. All this and more he asserted was taking its toll. While the Syrian people understood the need to support their Iraqi brethren, there had been "shouts" of discontent over their continued presence. He added that Syria feared the Iraqi refugees would remain for some time and that "settlement here or elsewhere is not a solution - going back is."

14. (C) Miqdad criticized the role of the international community and particularly that of the U.S. in dealing with the refugee crisis. He added the U.S. had a responsibility to assist because the crisis was a direct result of its invasion of Iraq. Yet "political aspects" continue to interfere with humanitarian assistance, Miqdad insisted. In response to Waxman's request that the SARG issue visas to eight DHS circuit riders, Miqdad questioned how Syria could cooperate with the U.S., particularly on allowing Department of Homeland Security (DHS) interviews of Iraqis, when President Bush was attacking Syria daily. "You can not expect us to cooperate on one issue and not on others," he argued. He asked how he could convince elements of his government that the U.S. was acting in good faith when there were daily criticisms of the SARG. "We need some kind words" in order to move this project along, he concluded. Waxman asked directly if the SARG would issue visas to the next DHS circuit rider team. The European Union (EU) had also done very little, primarily because the U.S. was discouraging direct assistance to the SARG, according to D/FM Miqdad.

14. (C) D/FM Miqdad objected to Waxman and Cammack's assertion that the U.S. was attempting to resettle the most vulnerable and needy refugees. Noting that the issue of removing Iraqis from their homeland is extremely sensitive, he claimed the U.S. was "cherry picking" refugees, particularly those with "certain religions" and those who had been assisting the U.S. in Iraq; not the elderly, and sick as the U.S. asserts.

16. (C) On assistance from the Iraqi government, Miqdad noted

DAMASCUS 00000064 002 OF 002

the Iraqi government had only recently acknowledged to its Syrian counterparts that there was a refugee crisis within Syrian's borders. Miqdad reported that during the December 2007 visit to Damascus of Iraqi Foreign Minister (FM) Hoshiyar Zerbary, FM Zerbary said the Iraqi government felt "shameful" for not helping Iraqis in Syria. Iraq's assistance had not amounted to much, according to Miqdad. He added he did not know if the 15 million dollars promised by the Iraq government for assistance relief had been delivered; if it had, it was surely the only assistance Syria had received from the Iraqi government.

Memorandum of Understanding Needed

17. (C) Waxman responded that the U.S. had and would continue to assist Iraqi refugees through the U.N. While the international community can do more, so can the SARG. Waxman and Cammack added that the Syrian government must move to release the memorandum of understanding that will allow non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate within Syria and assist Iraqi refugees.

18. (C) Miqdad admitted that bureaucratic arrangements within Syria hinders the SARG from acting quickly, but Syria was moving slowly to insure funds were spent appropriately on Iraqi refugees to prevent corruption. Additionally, the NGO situation in Darfur was not encouraging. The SARG was attempting to avoid a similar situation in Syria. Miqdad assured Waxman and Cammack the SARG was setting up a system to accredit NGOs and that "serious" NGOs would be able to operate within Syria. Miqdad admitted, however, that this was something his ministry wanted completed some time ago.

Human Rights - Something to Worry About Later

19. (C) At the conclusion of the meeting, Waxman broached the

subject of allowing oppositionist Riad Seif to leave Syria for needed medical treatment. Miqdad responded that he had heard Seif's condition was stable but if outside treatment was necessary, he would be allowed to leave Syria, on the condition that Seif refrains from conducting political activity while overseas. He added that those countries receiving Seif must recognize that Seif would be there for medical treatment and not for "political propaganda" purposes.

¶10. (C) Finally, Waxman pressed for the release of nine recently detained members of the Damascus Declaration National Council. Scoffing, Miqdad responded that nine was such a small number, particularly given that the U.S. has six million in prison. Reiterating recent public statements by the government on the matter, Miqdad informed Waxman and Cammack that this was an internal matter, not to be discussed with foreign visitors. He concluded by noting that at this point in time Syria did not have the luxury of allowing dissent which would weaken their national front. Waxman and Cammack left a list with names of the nine detainees with the D/FM.

¶11. (U) Waxman and Cammack were not able to clear this cable prior to their departure.
HOLMSTROM